

Chapter 129 - Ground Floor

A brief moment of silence followed my answer before both Pina and Cryo burst out laughing.

Mouse, meanwhile, sat there with his mouth opening and closing like a fish out of water—caught between wanting to strangle me with those twitchy, wiry fingers of his and grudging amusement he couldn't quite hide.

I exhaled a quiet sigh of relief, feeling the tension in my shoulders ease up ever so slightly.

My gamble had paid off, and it landed pretty well with the rest of the crew by all apparent accounts.

"Fine, girl. Have it your way then," Mouse finally conceded, his voice a blend of petulance and reluctant respect. "But I still want another shot at it. My ICE definitely snagged *something*—and I wanna know what it was. Now that I know what's coming, I'll definitely catch it!"

Before I could even start thinking up a reply, Cryo thankfully jumped in, cutting Mouse off. "Not today, Mouse. We gotta get movin', and soon. Nearly done double-checkin' the shard intel, so try not to zero yerself for another few minutes. I know it's hard, but do me this solid, yeah?"

Mouse practically deflated right then and there, throwing both hands up in defeat. "Fiiiiine. Then gimme a blip at least, girl. Five charges oughta do it—I'll pay ya for it. Five hundred Creds; if you get it ready fast."

My eyes immediately went wide at that number—except they didn't, because I was carefully controlling my facial expressions, not to cause a scene.

'Five hundred Credits? Holy shit, that's insane!'

"Oh, c'mon! Don't encourage this fucking freak," Pina groaned from her side of the booth, but I was already too deep in shock to pay her much attention.

"Deal," I replied without much hesitation at all, causing Pina's expression to sour like I'd spat in her drink.

"Haaa... Great. Juuuust great. Looks like I'll be the one scraping this fucking blank outta the gutter again," she lamented dramatically. "Ain't nobody ever got time for poor ol' Pina and her reasonable fucking requests, huh?"

Mouse was completely oblivious to her griping, grinning broadly as his eyes flashed yellow.

An instant later, a contact request popped up in my vision.

I immediately spooled up a private instance inside my cerebral interface—after my encounter with that mysterious "H," I wasn't taking chances with unsecured connections like this anymore—and cautiously accepted Mouse's details.

I immediately let my ICE run a deep-scan on it as well.

'My first-ever customer as a runner... though not exactly how I imagined,' I mused internally, unable to fully hide the satisfied grin that tried to break onto my face.

On the outside, though, I played it cool, offering Mouse and the others a calm, magnanimous nod with only a mild smile—one that even Valeria herself would've probably deemed "acceptable".

Five hundred Credits was no joke.

That kind of payday could seriously boost my equipment, or at least give me a nice cushion for whatever came next—assuming, of course, I managed to snag that Operator license at the end of this wild ride with Cryo's crew.

'Definitely a "I gotta figure this out now" kinda offer though,' I reminded myself, just to keep my head straight. No one in their right mind tossed that kind of money at a five-charge blip unless they had skin in the game—like Mouse clearly did.

Dude practically wanted to marry the damn thing.

Generally speaking, blips were basically single-use consumables, locked-down snippets of code that runners could use mid-Task without being able to crack them open and steal the underlying code itself. Because of that, they usually sold dirt-cheap compared to the full version—more like buying individual rounds of ammunition instead of a whole damn weapon.

Given how amateurish most of [Venombite] was—aside from the stealth layers I'd personally added and the [Spike] core that I'd flat-out lifted from Kill Joy's shard—there was absolutely no way anyone sane would pay the typical 100+ times multiplier for the full thing.

'So yeah, definitely a special case,' I concluded silently, still quietly pleased about the unexpected windfall. *'But creds are creds, and I'm sure as hell not turning them down; as much as Pina would have preferred that.'*

As if to put the final stamp on the deal, Cryo spoke up again, his voice casual but with that distinct tone of *let's move*, "Alright. Time to go."

He tossed back the last of his drink in one clean swig, glass hitting the table with a dull thunk. Pina mirrored him, draining hers like it was a race, while Mouse just stared mournfully at the shattered mess of what used to be his own glass—a casualty of his earlier death throes of the electrocution-by-[Venombite].

No pre-job chug for him.

Cryo gave me a nod and gestured toward the booth's door.

It was finally go-time.

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On the way to the nearest elevator, I trailed right behind Cryo, with Mouse and Pina bringing up the rear.

Cryo used the walk to give us the full rundown on the job, tossing the mission files our way mid-stride. I popped them open on my cerebral interface, letting the visuals and data stream past in the corner of my vision while I focused on his voice.

“Job should be simple, like expected,” he said over his shoulder, casual as ever. “Shard from the client lines up with our own intel. Small-time group o’ scavs. No big affiliations, no gang ties, no corpo backers. ‘S a straight-up, simple and clean sweep job—clear the place out.”

“Fuck yeah,” Pina muttered from behind, the metallic clap of her fists meeting startling a few passerbys in the thoroughfare.

Cryo didn’t even flinch at her outburst. “Location’s a dumpy complex out on Vinyard Ave. Thirteenth Layer, Section Three. Specifically buildin’ six.”

That address meant jack-all to me.

‘Vinyard Ave doesn’t ring any bells... but Thirteenth Layer, that tells me something, at least,’ I thought, dredging up half-forgotten fragments from my old life and everything I’d memorized from the Neon Dragons deep-dives.

Neo Avalis was built like a cake from hell—multi-tiered, concentric rings stacked outward from the city core like someone had tried to make a megastructure out of spare parts.

The further out you went from center, the further you got from the parts of the city with functioning infrastructure, security, and breathable air that didn’t taste like metal.

On top of that, you had the vertical layering: Unknown numbers of sub-ground levels, multiple highway levels, mid-rise living tiers, and who-knows-how-many rat-nests crammed between.

Some of the highways and train treks even went *through* buildings, slicing straight through crumbling towers because the city had just... kept building wherever it was necessary.

No zoning. No plan. Just sprawl and more sprawl.

Especially when it came to living spaces and that funky little idea called “private property”, Neo Avalis didn’t exactly have its laws written in titanium-laced ink. Things were very much in constant flux and more-or-less at the complete and utter mercy of the major megacorps that ruled the city.

If a new highway was needed to save one cred on transport costs for every million units created? Then your “private property” was suddenly earmarked as “construction space” for a new highway—bad luck, nothing to write home about; not that you had a home to write to afterwards anyway, but still.

Back in the game, navigation had been one of the top pain points for players—hell, entire forum threads and walkthroughs had been dedicated just to figuring out how to get from one

side of a damn district to the other without falling into a death-zone or getting clipped by traffic.

Trying to navigate the whole city? That was a different beast entirely.

Only the speedrunners and ultra-nerds who'd dumped thousands of hours into Neon Dragons had any real shot at pulling it off consistently.

For everyone else, the in-game 3D map was gospel. A real work of art in UI and UX design.

You could practically get dropped into a blender and still find your way out—because that map just *worked*. It let the level designers go absolutely nuts with the city layout, since the map would always somehow translate chaos into *something* usable.

A miracle of software. God-tier user experience.

But out here? In meatspace?

I didn't have *that* map.

Sure, my cerebral interface had a basic layout of Neo Avalis and pulled in public grids when it could. Stirling's deliveries had come with functional but pretty rough sub-maps—basically glorified GPS pings. But compared to what I had back in the game? It felt like going from satellite view to napkin doodles.

'I wonder if that map exists somewhere as an actual software...?' I found myself thinking, chewing the inside of my cheek. 'With how much of the game stuff maps one-to-one with this world, maybe it also exists somewhere around here... I gotta keep my eyes peeled for that—having the full map again would be a goddamn cheat code.'

I stared at the map Cryo had shared with me, but it may as well have been a spilled bowl of spaghetti.

No context, no landmarks I recognized.

Just a snarl of numbered blocks and broken lines that resembled an architectural blueprint more than any kind of usable map.

'I really hope Cryo knows how to get there...'

He, at least, didn't seem concerned in the slightest.

Just kept talking like we were heading to grab lunch, not gear up for murder. We stepped into the elevator and he hit the big glowing "0"—ground floor.

That's when it really hit me.

I was about to leave Delta for the first time.

Technically, I'd been outside once before—when Oliver wheeled me in after the hospital, looking like I'd just finished losing a bet with a semi-truck—but that didn't count.

I barely remembered it.

Drugged to the eyeballs, brain fogged up with confusion and fear and pure dissociation.

The whole day still felt like watching someone else's memory, if I was being completely honest.

But now? Now it was me. My own two feet. My own gear.

No hand holding beyond what this new unknown crew could provide.

Just straight into Neo Avalis. With all its grime, danger, and opportunity on full display.

Cryo spoke again, breaking the train of thought. "Like we discussed—Mouse'll keep watch for anyone tryin' to dip out, and keep us from gettin' pinged by potential runners. Pina'll try talkin' first. If that don't work, which I feel like it won't, it's me and Ela goin' in to clean up alongside her. Any questions?"

Yeah, actually. I had tons of questions.

So many, in fact, that my brain kind of stalled out trying to pick one.

And with the elevator counting down the floors way faster than I would've liked, I didn't exactly have the luxury of going down the whole list.

So I went with the big one. The practical one.

"What exactly is my role here, Cryo? I mean, I'm mostly a runner—but you've got me slotted as backup muscle, yeah?"

Cryo gave a nod, like he'd already figured I'd ask. "Exactly. With Mouse in the crew, we ain't needin' more than one runner for a gig like this. Scavs don't pack top-tier ICE or anything fancy. No runner support on 'em either. One runner's more'n enough and he can keep an eye on potential stragglers."

He jerked a thumb toward Pina next. "Pina can handle herself just fine, and so can I. But Scavs? They're twitchy little blanks. Unpredictable. Always better to have some extra muscle on hand, just in case one of 'em gets clever—or more likely: Desperate."

He turned back toward me, giving me a quick once-over. "And it also lets me see if ya got what it takes for this life. From what I've seen, yer gear's solid. Yer stance is good, movement too. And I can tell ya got more muscle than one would expect below those clothes, too. So I ain't worried about ya gettin' overpowered either. These ain't cybered-up mercs we're dealin' with. Just street rats with some broken shards of glass and bad hygiene."

He leaned slightly closer as if to underline it. "They ain't borgs. No heavy mods. No tactics. Just desperation and sharp objects. Odds are, we walk in with enough confidence and they'll scurry before it even comes to blows. Scavs don't do bravery—not unless they're cornered or hopped up on chems. This group, more than likely, doesn't even have real iron."

I nodded slowly, taking it all in, but I still kept my nerves on a tight leash.

Confidence was one thing—but getting cocky around armed lunatics with nothing to lose? That was how you wound up in the morgue with a shiv jammed into your skull, and a footnote on someone else's mission report.

Cryo's approach, then, made a lot of sense.

Herd them, don't corner them.

Keep the pressure just high enough that they bolt instead of bite.

The fact that intel suggested these particular scavs might not even be packing guns? That helped ease the knot in my chest a bit. I really wasn't in the mood to dance with a twitchy speed junkie cradling a pipegun and a death wish—not until I had my footing, anyway.

"So, we don't want to box them in, yeah?" I asked, circling back to something Cryo had said earlier.

"Correct," he nodded, dead serious now. "We leave 'em a nice, obvious door. Let 'em see the exit, plain as day. Like herdin' rats—we move in from the sides, push 'em toward that one clear option. Either they run for it, or they stay and get turned into paste."

He flicked a finger toward Mouse. "And Mouse'll keep an eye on the exits. If they start groupin' up or settin' up an ambush out there, he'll handle it. They leave the nest, they don't get to come back."

"Got it," I said, giving him another small nod.

It really *did* sound simple. Brutal, sure, but clean and effective.

Still, even with the steady rhythm of their voices and the way Pina and Mouse kept sniping at each other like bored siblings—Mouse now ranting about the "aesthetic thrill" of shorting out his nervous system—my pulse wouldn't settle.

'Not like anyone can really blame me,' I figured.

First time leaving the Megabuilding on my own two feet. First time stepping into the real city.

First time heading into what was almost definitely a lethal situation with real enemies and real consequences with knowledge thereof ahead of time.

It wasn't exactly the kind of intro mission I'd hoped for—but, hey, I wasn't exactly in a position to be picky here.

A few seconds later, the elevator dinged and hissed open.

Cryo strode out first, like he owned the place. I followed right behind him, and immediately had to stop myself from gaping like a tourist.

The lobby of Delta was *massive*—less like a residential exit and more like a major international airport from my past life.

And not the clean, sterile kind either. No, this place had age baked into every corner of it.

The floors were scuffed raw from millions—no, billions—of footsteps, oil-stained in patches where old service bots had probably bled out or where some of the thousands of drones flying overhead beneath the far-too-high ceiling had leaked some of theirs.

Faint graffiti crawled up the humongous rockcrete structural-pillars that held up the entire Megabuilding on their backs, like urban ivy, half-scrubbed off in places, left untouched in others.

But despite the grime and wear apparent on every surface and in every corner of the lobby, everything was still operational—still *alive*.

Neon lights and the smog of combined food stall vapour, sweat and vaporising of various oils from the drones and service-bots bathed everything in a constant artificial twilight, pulsing and flickering like the heartbeat of the very Megabuilding itself.

Overhead, the ceiling stretched up so far I couldn't even see where it ended, just a mess of steel beams, vent ducts, exposed pipework, and clusters of thousands of aging maintenance drones skittering along rail-lines.

Neon signage hung from the steel framework, glowing in every color of the spectrum and flashing directions in six, seven, sometimes even eight different languages: *Stores & Shops* →, *Elevators* ←, *Medical*, *Transit Lines*, and—finally—*Exit*, glowing in harsh white kana, standard script, and some symbols I didn't even recognize from this distance.

Farther out, past the river of foot traffic around me and the rest of the squad, I could see why the lobby had such a steady pulse as well.

Stores packed the perimeter, jammed wall-to-wall.

Vendor stalls and glass-panelled shops fought for attention with loud, animated displays—selling everything from chrome-plated discount-cyberware to vats of street noodles and neon-glazed protein cubes.

Music blared from one storefront, while a VR parlor across from it advertised “Full-Dive Combat Sims – No Pain, Full Gain!” in spinning, glitchy text.

People moved in dense waves, all shapes, sizes, and augment levels, each on some kind of mission—or just trying not to get trampled, which would have definitely been my main goal as well, if I wasn't following Cryo closely who was acting as a human breach-tank for me and the rest of the squad.

That thought actually made me briefly check on Pina and Mouse, who should have been right behind me, but as I turned around, my brain short-circuited for a second.

The elevator banks we had just left stretched out in both directions—hundreds of them.

Not dozens. *Hundreds.*

All identical, all sleek and matte black, rimmed with dull red indicators showing the floors they were servicing. Their doors opened and shut with the same rhythmic precision and characteristic “whoosh” like the steady breathing of some enormous mechanical beast.

That alone would’ve been enough to overload me, but then I realized something else.

*‘This was just **one** face of the central elevator column...’*

The whole damn center of the lobby was a multi-sided, towering core of elevators, all of them working around the clock, ferrying tens, if not hundreds of thousands of residents up and down like a hive in full operation.

The scale of it hit me like a punch to the chest.

I had always *known* the megabuildings were massive—everyone did.

I had seen players enter some of the other Megabuildings on a Task here and there, so the general layout and idea of it all wasn’t alien to me whatsoever.

But standing here, seeing it with my own eyes instead of through a screen?

It was *overwhelming*. And strangely humbling.

*‘And this is just **one** of the Megabuildings...’*

The only real upside compared to the fifth floor was the air—it was actually halfway breathable down here.

Which felt like a joke, considering the tenfold increase in bodies, food stalls, smoke, and every other kind of pollutant that usually made a place like this feel like you were choking on a mix of sweat, old ramen, and exhaust fumes.

But something about the sheer *scale* of the lobby gave the smells more room to stretch out.

The stink didn’t hang in your nose like it did just a few floors upstairs.

‘Or maybe there’s some industrial-grade scrubbers hidden somewhere,’ I figured, eyes scanning the higher walls and ceiling for signs of the massive intake vents I remembered from the game.

The corporate ones had entire air-control systems the size of apartments—scrubbers, chillers, condensers, everything jammed together like a lung made of chrome.

Of course, spotting them now wasn’t happening.

Too many bodies in the way, most of them taller than me.

Between towering augments, long coats, and the occasional exosuit stomp-clanking past, I didn’t exactly have a clear view. And I didn’t want to stop to gawk again.

I caught sight of Pina and Mouse behind me—Mouse still jittering slightly from his earlier ‘reboot’, and Pina arguing with him again over something I couldn’t quite hear. I let it fade into background noise and turned my attention back to Cryo’s broad silhouette cutting a line through the crowd ahead.

No sense trying to make sense of the chaos now.

I’d have time to get familiar with Delta’s ground floor later—hell, I *needed* to.

This place was probably going to be my hub for a while, at least until I either moved or got high enough in the food chain to run out of some private base like the big Operators did.

For now, it was just a matter of sticking to Cryo like glue while navigating through the crush of people.

And that *crush* didn’t let up.

It was like walking upstream in a flood of humanity—bodies everywhere, bumping shoulders, brushing arms, the scent of sweat, synth-cologne, and burning synth-meat thick in the air.

It took a few minutes of careful maneuvering and sheer persistence before the density began to ease up.

That’s when I noticed the doors we were heading towards.

To call them “doors”, however, was definitely a disservice.

These things looked like they belonged on the side of a carrier ship—giant, reinforced shutters that could probably seal the building if a bomb went off outside; or inside.

They loomed on either side of us, flanked by heavily armored support columns and automated scanning drones flitting lazily near the ceiling. But the real sign that we were close to the exterior?

The smell.

Neo Avalis didn’t just have a scent—it had an *atmosphere*.

Smog, motor oil, old metal, ozone, and a hint of rot.

The kind of chemical cocktail that could only be brewed by decades of overcrowding and unchecked industry. Even with the towering Sobirashu Corporation scrubbers scattered across the city like monoliths to corporate superiority—those massive, humming towers that scraped the skies and promised to “reclaim the air for the people”—you couldn’t escape it.

Not really.

I swallowed against the burn in my throat and made a mental note, ‘*I need to get myself a damn filtermask.*’

Then, just as suddenly as the crowd had closed in, it dispersed.

We stepped past some invisible threshold and the people peeled away like fog in sunlight—each going their own way, pulled apart by their own destinations and distractions.

And that's when I realized: I was outside.

Actually, *fully* outside.

Not a window. Not a balcony. Not the brief blur of being pushed in a wheelchair months ago.

I had just walked out of Delta—and stepped into Neo Avalis proper...